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SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ JUNE 1999

SACRED JOURNEY™

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

CONTENTS

Vol. 50, No. 3, June 1999

FROM THE PRESIDENT	2
FROM THE EDITOR	4
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS	
Facing East: A Journey	
into Eastern Orthodoxy	
<i>Frederica Mathewes-Green</i>	7
The Jesus Prayer	
<i>Frederica Mathewes-Green</i>	18
POETRY	26
ILLUMINATIONS	27
THE WAYS OF PRAYER	
Praying From the Surface of Your Skin	
<i>Richard J. Broderick</i>	28
A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE	
Revisiting the Emptiness	
<i>Jane O'Shaughnessy</i>	30
SPIRITUALITY & THE FAMILY	
In My Father's House	
<i>Elizabeth M. Racicot</i>	36
PRAYERS	40
PILGRIMAGE	
In Search of Ramana	
<i>Robert Hirschfield</i>	42

Cover photo by: Kristina Brendel. Orthodox Cathedral, Minsk, Belarus.

FROM THE PRESIDENT



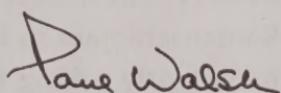
In his book *Healing Words*, Dr. Larry Dossey, M.D.,* world famous for his scientific research establishing the link between prayer and healing, says the desire to pray seems to be innate. Dossey quotes theologian and Jungian psychoanalyst Ann Ulanov* who writes that prayer is the most fundamental, primordial, and important "language" humans speak.

Prayer, as a way to come into a closer relationship with God, or the Divine source of our being, may, of course, be vocal or silent, sung or danced, individual or communal. It depends. Are you an introvert or an extravert? When, how, and where we pray—in a church, temple, or on a hillside overlooking the ocean—is an individual matter and depends largely on our spiritual temperament. We can pray for what we want or need, for ourselves or others, or pray unreservedly and sincerely that "Thy will be done." Dr. Dossey's research studies indicate that since we can't always know what's best for ourselves or others, it's often better to set aside our preferences and demands and pray for "the best possible outcome." Above all, don't blame yourself for spiritual failure if you pray and you or your loved ones get sick anyway. Many great saints and mystics died of dreadful diseases, sometimes at a young age, despite their undoubted holiness.

But what if you can't find meaningful words of prayer? In *Healing Words*, Dr. Dossey tells us about a woman who wrote him saying that she felt a deep desire to pray, but couldn't bring herself to use words. They seemed to her to be "unnecessary and silly." Dr. Dossey's response to that not unusual dilemma is that, "Prayer is an attitude of the heart—a matter of *being*, not doing. Prayer is the desire to contact the Absolute, however it may be conceived. When we experience the need to activate this connection we are praying, whether or not we use words." "Such people," says Dr. Dossey, "live with a deeply internalized sense of the sacred that amounts to a constant state of prayerfulness." As Thomas Merton said, "I pray by breathing."

My own experience is that if I start any conversation with God—no matter how negative I'm feeling—by expressing a genuine and deeply felt sense of gratitude for what is; for the goodness and blessedness of right here—right now, in this very moment, then all will be well. May it be so for you, also.

God between you and all harm,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Paul Walsh".

Paul Walsh

* Larry Dossey and Ann and Barry Ulanov will be the principal speakers at "Companions On the Sacred Journey," Fellowship in Prayer's 50th Anniversary Celebration in Princeton, NJ, to be held June 16, 17, and 18, 2000.

FROM THE EDITOR



East is a geographical term. From where I live in New Jersey the sun rises from the east as if it emerges from the Atlantic and crawls over New York City's skyline before settling in over my suburban skies. East is also a religious and cultural term. Millions face East to savor, explore, and practice the mystical paths that have long anchored the souls of peoples living in Slavic and Asian lands. In this issue we juxtapose two divergent Eastern traditions. In *Questions & Answers*, Frederica Mathewes-Green narrates her conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity which is replete with ornate worship and offers an accessible mystical practice in the Jesus Prayer. Robert Hirshfield's pilgrimage East takes him to Ramanasramam in India where probing one's inner self by persistently asking the koan-like question, "Who am I?" is said to lead to the discovery of ultimate reality.

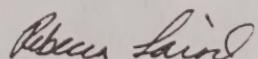
Facing East doesn't come easily for me, a Westerner by geography and faith. The majority of my years have been lived beyond the Rocky Mountains within the magnetic pull of the Pacific. I made many important decisions while sitting on the sand watching the sun set over the waves. I'll never forget how puzzled I was during one of my first visits to the New Jersey shore. Walking on the boardwalk in the late afternoon, I noticed people had turned their beach chairs

away from the water. Why would they turn their backs to the roaring beauty of the ocean? Then I looked up. These people wanted to bathe in the last glorious moments of the sun. Ah, yes, if the sun sets over the ocean in the West, that means it sets over land in the East. I was reminded that my internal geography is not a universal vantage point.

In this month's *A Transforming Experience* Jane O'Shaughnessy revisits a youthful summer where she began to embrace her emptiness as a place of spiritual transformation. Elizabeth Racicot takes another type of trip home by releasing her alcoholic father and finding herself mysteriously embraced by the father in God, whom she had long ago rejected. Richard Broderick dives into a cold Adirondack lake to escape summer's heat only to discover that his skin knows how to pray. Poet Jennifer Anne Cottrill captures in words the heaviness of a June thunderstorm in the soul just before a cloudburst of grace.

Wherever this issue finds you, facing East or West, praying from the surface of your skin or in the midst of inner pain, may God's face shine upon you and bring you peace.

Blessings,



Rebecca Laird

Frederica Mathewes-Green



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Facing East: A Journey into Eastern Orthodoxy



Frederica Mathewes-Green

Frederica Mathewes-Green, author of Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy, picked up the phone at our prearranged hour. She pushed aside the final rewrite of her forthcoming book to talk to me in her resonant voice that lifts often with humor. (Her book also weaves the haunting melodies and liturgical prayers of the ancient Eastern Orthodox liturgy with truly funny moments in her life as a Christian, writer, priest's wife, and mother of three children.) Frederica is a regular commentator for "All Things Considered" broadcast on National Public Radio and for the Odyssey television network. She is also a columnist for Christianity Today and a contributing editor for Books & Culture. Her next book, At the Corner of East and Now: A Modern Life in Ancient Christian Orthodoxy, will be in bookstores in September.

Rebecca Laird: In your book, *Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy*, you describe your college years as "a restless search for something that would ring true." You explored Hinduism and feminism and considered Christianity to be "an oppressive, patriarchal religion that took people away from the real work

of revolution." Yet your book describes a more recent year in your life as a convert to Eastern Orthodox Christianity—a tradition that has an all-male priesthood, demands rigorous discipline, adheres to ancient liturgies where believers make full-bodied prostrations and kiss icons. So who or what changed?

Frederica Mathewes-Green: My college years certainly were a restless search. One of the factors at that time was that I was not a very mature person. I was quite agitated in my spirit and very egocentric and vain. I was looking, in part, for something that rang true. I was also looking for excitement and for stimulation. I think I was looking for a spiritual approach that would look good on me—that would be flattering, exotic, and would "wow" my friends. I really had a hunger to know God, I believe, even though I had really rather vehemently cast away the Christian faith of my childhood. When I began searching again, I believed there had to be something out there, some kind of reality beyond what I could see. I could see the world was so charged with beauty and life and energy that it seemed to echo something greater, behind it or beyond it. I was eager to know what that might be.

What I discovered was different from what I expected. I was moving intellectually toward Eastern philosophy, Hinduism in particular, because I enjoyed the color, poetry, and many gods of that faith. I found it aesthetically pleasing. I was mentally going in that direction and was quite pulled up short by an experience I had in a Dublin church while hitchhiking on my honeymoon. I was walking around the church admiring the architecture, the stained glass windows, and the statues. While looking at a statue of Jesus, I found that I was on my knees and I could hear a voice inside speak-

ing to me, "I am your life. I am your life." The words were repeated in various forms insisting that whatever I thought I knew of life was only the surface and that my life really was rooted in Jesus Christ, somebody I had never been interested in spiritually before. I think at the time I could have argued that Jesus had never existed, that he was a figment of people's imagination. And yet as I was there, the presence was overwhelming. This was something more real than I had ever experienced before. I felt fairly stunned by the experience.

What happened after your experience in the Dublin church?

It took me about a week to gather together enough courage to even tell my husband who was not yet a Christian. I kept it a secret as I tried to incorporate what this was and figure it out. We had both been very sophisticated in our spiritual exploration. We decided at this time that obviously I was going to be a mystic on a par with Teresa of Avila. Six months later we came home, started seminary, and discovered there were all different stripes and types of Christians. We began attending, of all things, a charismatic worship service at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. I recall sitting there and hearing people speaking in tongues. There was something attractive about it; we recognized something of the mysticism we had begun to study.

In December of that year, 1974, one of our classmates asked us: "Have you ever given your lives to Jesus? Have you ever knelt down and asked Jesus into your heart and made a commitment to Jesus as your Lord?" Our reaction was, "Oh, we are not Baptists." We associated that talk with very low-church, enthusiastic, and probably blue-collar

spiritual experience. My husband had been raised Episcopalian and I had been raised Catholic, and we considered ourselves above that. But our friend said, "It really is a good idea, if this is your spiritual path, to make a demarcation point, a starting point." So the three of us knelt down together in our living room and prayed. We made it official that both of us wanted to submit to Jesus Christ as our Lord for the rest of our lives. What had begun in a Dublin church reached a crystallization point at that moment.

You had thought up to this point that Christianity took people away from a focus on revolution. What became your focal point from this point on in your life?

I found that the true revolution was within and that it was spiritual. I was being called to an interior struggle where I tried every day to break down whatever barriers or walls there were inside of me that blocked me from getting closer to Jesus. His life and beauty became so compelling. What I really had to fight against was my selfishness and all of the ways that I preferred self-indulgence and promoting myself over other people.

Tell us how you got past "the bare truth part, the aching feet part," to discover the mystical beauty of Orthodoxy.

My husband and I finished seminary and we couldn't find a bishop at the time who would ordain us both. This was just after the first women priests were ordained in the Episcopal church. My husband was ordained and we served Episcopal churches for fifteen years. Over time my husband grew uneasy with change in the Episcopal church, both moral

and theological. He began to ask, "What was there in Christianity that went back a thousand years, fifteen hundred years?" He visited an Orthodox church, fell in love with it, and couldn't wait to become Orthodox. I dragged my heels for a couple of years. I just didn't get it. It was too hard, for one thing. It was too rigorous, incomprehensible. I didn't find all the help I would have liked, such as books in the pews to explain what was going on and guide me through the service. My style was much more evangelical. I like to sing out loud and feel emotionally moved by the service. I gradually came to see that the Orthodox service was more focused on God. I was used to worship that was more focused on me.

Once you come through the doors of an Orthodox church, you can hardly tell what is going on. There are no standardized prayer books and it is an uphill struggle. A friend of mine says: "I don't believe in organized religion; I'm Orthodox." In Orthodoxy you learn by doing, by exposing yourself to worship over and over again. It is an acquired taste, but as with many acquired tastes, it becomes something you long to taste again because somehow it is already deep inside of you.

Orthodoxy began to grow on me. As the Psalm says, "deep calls to deep." I found something deep inside of me responding to it. I found that, in fact, there is a purpose to worship and that purpose is to worship God. The other things that we often do in worship services in Western churches: teaching, expository sermons, Bible studies, or fellowship times, are important and should be done, but they are not necessarily worship. On Sunday morning when we are worshiping, everything is flowing out of us toward God. As we see it in the Book of Revelation, worship is proceeding eternally in glory, and in our Orthodox worship we be-

lieve we are somehow caught up in that, as if our very spirits ascend and we stand just on the fringe of that heavenly worship.

Orthodox life is full of fasts and feasts, prayers and prostrations, chants and communion. This is not a spontaneous, freewheeling, pick-and-choose spirituality. You write that these various disciplines are “just tools to bring us deeper yieldedness, repentance, and gratitude.” Give us an example of what this means to you.

The first example that comes to mind is the fasting. When we fast, we don’t abstain from all food. For an extended period of time we do without meat, dairy products, any kind of animal product, fish with backbones, alcoholic beverages or olive oil. That requires a very rigorous change in your eating habits. Of course, the world is full of vegetarian cuisines that you can draw upon; there are plenty of things to eat. But pulling into the burger barn for a milkshake and a cheeseburger is no longer possible.

Fasting confronts you three times a day. You have to think: “I can’t have a bowl of cereal with milk for breakfast or a tuna casserole for dinner.” You have to be constantly adjusting your eating habits. This creates self-discipline. You learn to deny yourself things you would automatically have without even thinking and, perhaps, without enjoying them as they are so familiar. It reminds you that there are so many immediate desires within us, desires you never question that keep us baffled and dimmed as to the presence of God. As we burn through those, we begin to see God more clearly.

Fasting is difficult. You feel hungry. You feel deprived; you discover you aren’t such a pleasant person to be around. There is a lot of irritability immediately under the surface if

you don't get what you want when you want it. Much of the interior substructure of sin is revealed when you begin to fast.

Secondly, fasting has a corporate dimension. Everyone in the church keeps the same fasts. We fast during Lent for seven weeks before *Pascha* (Easter), for the Apostles' feast for two weeks in June, for two weeks in August before the Dormition, the falling asleep of the Virgin, and from November 15 until Christmas. Also we fast every Wednesday and Friday in the rest of the Church year. We support and encourage each other. We share recipes. We have a big feast every Sunday after church and discover new foods together. These things create a sense of community.

You write in your book that "separating current cultural faith from eternal faith is awfully hard to do from inside the mesmerizing culture." How does Orthodox faith challenge your life as an American living at the cusp of a new millennium?

The culture we live in presumes that consumerism is the foundation or the bedrock. Rather than be producers as the previous generations were, we mostly define ourselves by what we consume, what we wear, what we acquire. That is entirely foreign to Orthodoxy.

More significantly, the Orthodox emphasis on repentance is a challenge to American life. Repentance has an unfortunate association in our Western mind with turn-of-the-century fundamentalism and people beating you up emotionally by telling you how terrible you are. In Orthodoxy, there is a concept of "joyful sorrow." St. John Climacus coined the word which puts joy and sorrow together. We recognize that we are far from God because of our own sinful

ness and at the same time we recognize that he has loved us so much that he sent his son to die for us. In a paradoxical way, the more you see the depth of your own sin, the more you realize how great that gift is. If you think you are a pretty good person and you only need to be forgiven a little bit, then the cross looks very small. But the more you see the depth of your sin, the more you realize the magnitude of the sacrifice and the more you see how immense this love is that surrounds us. This love is larger than anything we have ever known before; it is larger than we can even imagine. This combination of repentance that leads to joy places us in a stance of gratitude. You see your sin and you see, with gratitude, what God has done.

Our current culture deals with guilt mostly by blaming another bad guy or by denying it by saying, "you don't need to feel guilty, you are not really so bad." I think the guilt we feel at a lot of times is there, in fact, because we are guilty. We aren't kind to others. We do like to cheat around the edges. We like to take the last piece of pie. Self-indulgence leads us to become people with little self-respect. So we keep trying to cover that over with what I call the frosting cycle. You eat a can of frosting and then you feel really bad and wonder, "What can I do to feel better?" Then you go and get another can of frosting because you think it makes you feel better. In the West we are caught in this frosting cycle where, when we feel bad, we indulge ourselves but we don't feel any better. The way out of that, according to the wisdom of the Christian East, would be: Admit the crummy things you do. Face up to it. Tell it to someone else. Tell it to a priest and hear him tell you that you are forgiven. Go and partake of communion, the body and blood of Christ, knowing how much that cost God. That's a joy you can hardly describe.

Many people talking about spirituality these days don't talk much about issues of guilt and self-indulgence as you do.

I see there is a spirituality fad that doesn't go very deep, and will not be ultimately satisfying because people aren't wrestling with the depths of themselves. They are looking for more frosting. I find a balance in the giants, the leaders of Orthodoxy. When they speak theoretically, they are very harsh: "This is the truth, and nothing else is the truth." But when dealing with individuals, they bend over backwards to be kind. They are very gentle with people who are on a journey. They want to hold very firmly to the standard, but in dealing with individuals there is a great hesitation to criticize. They encourage people and believe that the holy spirit is drawing them forward and hope that they are being drawn to a true path.

Many of the spiritual practices you describe in the life of Orthodoxy are communal. You pray, worship, and eat together several times a week. You don't just sit alongside of these people on Sundays. Your daily lives are intertwined. Does this togetherness reflect an essential part of Orthodoxy?

This is certainly true about our church. I only really know Holy Cross, a new, close-knit parish, established only six years ago. We are mostly converts with a great deal of enthusiasm. We share a faith that we don't find much in the secular world where we work every day. To some extent, those factors might be creating the communal life that we have. On the other hand, it looks to me as if Orthodox practice provides this anyway. We are expected in church, on a minimum, on Saturday night and Sunday morning.

One element that probably makes a difference is that in an Orthodox church you can only have one service of the Eucharist. Everybody who is a member of that church comes into the church building at the same time. That tends to strengthen a sense of community. There aren't other groups there at different times with a different ambience. Ideally, in Orthodoxy you wouldn't have big churches because the relationship between the parishioner and the spiritual father is so intimate. So instead of having a mega-church with thousands and thousands of people, you would have many small churches with more priests ministering on this very personal level. All of these things promote a sense of community in Orthodoxy.

Many institutional churches are losing members while in this country the Orthodox Church is growing. Why do you think this is so?

There are probably as many different reasons why the Orthodox Church is growing as there are different types of people coming. A large component are Evangelical Christians looking for an ancient church, and who discover the liturgy, and haven't before seen worship this beautiful and profoundly moving. There are some, like my husband and me, who were members of a mainline church. We had a lovely liturgy in our high Episcopal church, but we were seeing the church changing, chasing after what I fear is transitory relevance. We have some people in our church who have come out of atheism, agnosticism, or New Age, where I was twenty-five years ago. One of the things that appeals to them in Eastern Orthodoxy is that there is a mystical tradition that is accessible to everyone. You don't have to be a monk or nun in order to follow a mystical path. The Jesus

Prayer really is available to every lay person. Every person is expected to be on a path toward oneness and union with God. The Orthodox Church offers 2000 years of experience on how to fast, how to pray, the guidance that you need so that you don't fall into self-deception. A person looking toward Eastern mystical traditions may find that there is an Eastern Christian mystical tradition that is just as solid and trustworthy as it can be. Perhaps the most mysterious is the fact that people are drawn to something that resembles nothing else in contemporary American life. Orthodoxy is not consumer-focused. It is not comfortable. It is extravagantly beautiful. Orthodoxy is very ornate and very ancient. I wonder if that has an appeal for people who are weary of the constant shift and bustle of contemporary culture.

As a member of this church and a follower of Jesus Christ, I have to say the real reason that anybody comes is because Jesus is here. He is so beautiful, so compelling, and he draws people in. All these other superficial things may catch the eye, like a piece of aluminum foil catches the eye of a magpie. When you come in it is his beauty and you want to fall at his feet and worship.

I see my experience as full circle. The more I read, the more I pray, the more I say the Jesus Prayer, the more I fast, the more I go to communion, I feel closer and closer to Jesus and to that one true, centering moment twenty-five years ago when I heard Jesus tell me that he was my life. That is something I am on a journey toward every day in my life. Orthodoxy has helped me immensely in that journey.

THE JESUS PRAYER



Frederica Mathewes-Green

A couple of weeks ago Holy Cross sponsored a two-day retreat on the Jesus Prayer, also known as the Prayer of the Heart. We found more interest than we anticipated; every space was booked within days of the announcement, and a waiting list began to form. People want to pray, I guess, but tend to be plagued by fears they're doing it wrong. The appeal of the Jesus Prayer is that it is so simple.

Many people encounter this prayer for the first time in Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, where the distressed young woman describes it to her bored boyfriend over a restaurant lunch. Franny had been reading *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an anonymous Russian work of the mid-nineteenth century. In that book the pilgrim narrator recounts his desperate longing to learn to "pray without ceasing" and his wanderings across the country in search of someone who could teach him. A wise monk, whom the pilgrim takes as his *staretz* or spiritual father, instructs him and gives him *The Philokalia*, a collection of writings on mysticism and the spiritual life composed between the fourth and fourteenth centuries.

From Facing East: A Pilgrim's Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy. Copyright © 1997 by Frederica Mathewes-Green. Reprinted by arrangement with HarperSan Francisco, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

The pilgrim recalls the conversation:

"Read this book," [the staretz] said. "It is called *The Philokalia*, and it contains the full and detailed science of constant interior prayer, set forth by twenty-five holy Fathers. The book is marked by a lofty wisdom and is so profitable to use that it is considered the foremost and best manual of the contemplative spiritual life . . ."

"Is it then more sublime and holy than the Bible?" I asked.

"No, it is not that. But it contains clear explanations of what the Bible holds in secret and which cannot be easily grasped by our shortsighted understanding."

The staretz compares the Bible to the sun and *The Philokalia* to a small piece of dark glass that enables a person to view its rays. With this sort of buildup one expects something esoteric and complex, but the prayer is simple. The staretz reads to the pilgrim St. Simeon the New Theologian's instructions in *The Philokalia*:

"Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, i.e., your thoughts, from your head to your heart. As you breathe out say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Say it moving your lips gently, or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient, and repeat the process very frequently."

The pilgrim is delighted with this advice but at first finds himself bored, sleepy, and plagued with other thoughts. The kindly staretz encourages him to persevere and gives him a circle of black knotted yarn called a prayer rope, or *chotki*. The staretz tells him to use it as a marker for repeating the Jesus Prayer at heroic length, beginning with three thousand a day. "Say it quietly and without hurry, but without fail exactly three thousand times a day without deliberately increasing or diminishing the number. God will help you and by this means you will reach also the unceasing activity of the heart." The first two days are hard, but then the pilgrim finds, "I grew so used to my prayer that when I stopped for a single moment, I felt, so to speak, as though something were missing, as though I had lost something. The very moment I started the prayer again, it went on easily and joyously."

The staretz increases the repetition to six thousand, then twelve thousand. At that point, "Early one morning the prayer woke me up as it were . . . My whole desire was fixed upon one thing only—to say the prayer of Jesus, and as soon as I went on with it I was filled with joy." The staretz is pleased and says,

"Such happiness is reserved for those who seek God in the simplicity of a loving heart. Now I give you permission to say your prayer as often as you wish and as often as you can. Try to devote every moment you are awake to the prayer, call on the name of Jesus Christ without counting the number of times, and submit yourself humbly to the will of God."

As the prayer moves into the heart it becomes automatic. Later in the book, the pilgrim describes this to a blind man traveling with him:

"Can you not picture your hand or your foot as clearly as if you were looking at it? . . . Then picture to yourself your heart in just the same way, turn your eyes to it just as though you were looking at it through your breast, and picture it as clearly as you can. And with your ears listen closely to its beating, beat by beat. When you have got into the way of doing this, begin to fit the words of the prayer to the beats of the heart one after the other, looking at it all the time. Thus, with the first beat, say or think, 'Lord,' with the second, 'Jesus,' with the third, 'Christ,' with the fourth, 'have mercy,' and with the fifth, 'on me.' And do it over and over again."

This slightly different approach to beginning the Jesus Prayer was appealing to me; I can't imagine counting three thousand repetitions of anything, much less twelve thousand. So about a month ago I began spending a half hour every night listening to my heart beat out the words of this prayer. At first I didn't think it was possible to hear your own heartbeat, but before much practice I could sense the pulsing, that faint whispering rhythm.

I wake up almost every night to pray, usually about 3:30 in the morning. I've been doing this since I was pregnant with Megan, almost nineteen years. In the early years I'd spend the time reading the Bible and talking with the Lord. Then for a few years, I read the morning prayer service from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, pleased to imagine I was the first person in the country to do so each day.

About ten years ago my Catholic spiritual director told me I was long past time to begin centering prayer, so I should select a word and repeat it endlessly in my mind; later, when I went to the monk Father David for spiritual counsel, he

emphasized that if we pray anything except the name of Jesus we open ourselves to unknown spirits. So I began repeating Jesus' name with every exhalation, for a half hour each night. In the last month I've started expanding that to the Jesus Prayer itself. The goal is to focus on those recurring words, not on any other prayers or intercessions, not on Bible study or theological truths; you have all day long for that. For this half hour, just fall into the presence of God like warming your hands before a fire, without a conscious thought in your head.

Tonight I rise as usual, about 3:15. Gary, lying next to me, is snoring in a low blubbery way, one of the sweetest tender sounds of my life.

I sit up and stretch my toes to the floor from our high old four-poster bed. Fall is coming on and it's getting cold, and throughout the house haphazard window management has left some open and some closed. The radiator at my bedside ticks furiously as the thermostat, downstairs in the dining room, duels with an open window nearby. I pad across the worn, flattened Oriental rug; where it's trodden away to bare strands, smaller rugs are laid randomly on top. The floorboards in this seventy-year-old house creak underfoot.

My office is in the next room, through a connecting door; it must have been intended as a nursery. Through the window over my desk I can see the slender moon wasting away. The old slate roof of the garage looks blue in the light. It's never dark in the city. Down below, Molly the cat is patrolling the driveway.

I sink onto the sofa, one my parents bought when I was a baby; I have a photo of myself and my mother on it when I was about four. About twenty years ago Gary and I reupholstered it with the cheapest remnant fabric we could find, a faded and mismatched paisley brown. It's part of the

general scrapbook effect here: to the left of the window over my desk is a bulletin board studded with photos of friends and *Zippy* comic strips that Rod the Reporter keeps sending me and that I don't really get; to the right, the painting by Sheila of an abandoned warehouse in brilliant autumn light, and several icons including the perennial King of Glory. Along the windowsill lie an old heart-shaped cookie cutter I found when we were cleaning out my grandmother's house, old glass bottles that double as vases when my roses are in bloom, and more icons. On the desk, in addition to the beige complement of electronic devices fed by three phone lines, are pens in a red mug made by a friend who died of cancer. Between two fluted white marble bookends are my old red Bible, calendars, phone directories; a U.S. road atlas to plot travel, a regional-restaurants guide to accompany the road atlas, and a fine, fat thesaurus.

On the radiator, next to four years' worth of author's-copy magazines, is an old pink teapot I found at a thrift shop; I placed it here just so I could look at it when bogged down in writing and be encouraged by its cheery bulbous shape. My dad's thirties-era toy train runs along the green bookcase. Megan's old wooden high chair, which Gary painted with a rainbow before she was born, holds a six-inch stack of scrap paper. Next to it, a thunderstorm painted by a young David and two of his more recent still lifes. A framed Mother's Day message from a younger, but always emphatic, Stephen: "You are vary nice mom! p.s. I relle mean it!" On the bright blue filing cabinets, boxes of envelopes, business cards, an iron, a watering pot, tools of various trades. Above the sofa, a large religious folk art embroidery that I found crumpled in a bin of curtains at the Salvation Army thrift shop and that they gave me free. And on the sofa, a dozen memory-pillows made from old or sentimen-

tal fabric: a square from a favorite shirt, a “cathedral-cloth” print from a Ugandan bishop’s wife, heart-shaped puffles made by the kids, a faded lavender pillow slip embroidered by my grandmother. There are several hand-crocheted blankets, baby shower gifts of long ago. And, now, me.

I sit at the edge of the sofa and drape around my shoulders the biggest baby blanket; someone gave this to me before Meg was born, and I remember she’d carefully found wrapping paper and ribbon to match, but I don’t remember her name. I hold up the little clock so that the light can strike it through the window: 3:21. Okay, then, go to 3:51. After years of this, a lot of times I find myself automatically sur-

facing at the end of the period, rising up out of prayer as if from the bottom of a pool. If I pick up the clock and squint at it then, I can see the thirtieth minute appear.

*Lord,
Jesus Christ,
have mercy
on me.*

Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Oh, I forgot to cross myself. Okay. Is there anything I need to recollect before

the Lord and clear out of the way? Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. Last week, before I got up to speak at a banquet, the pastor asked everyone to pray for an anointing on me. At that moment I realized with a sudden shock that I am very headstrong and rebellious. Maybe this is obvious to everyone who knows me, but it’s something I hadn’t imagined before. And in fact, I’m not sure what I’m rebellious about. I feel pretty agreeable. I love the Lord and always want to be near him; my whole prayer is to be conformed to him. So I don’t know how I’m rebellious. But it hit me like a slap in the face. I could see myself, smug and proud. I feel at a loss, thinking of that.

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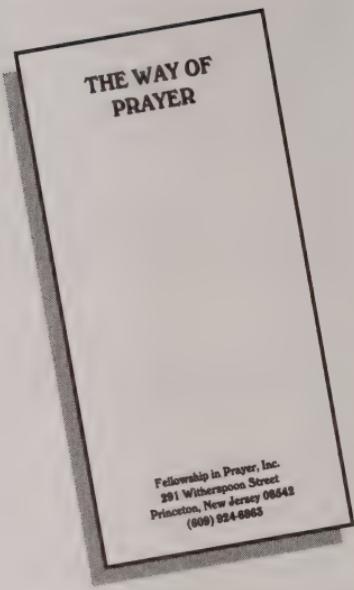
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* * * * *

Please use this space to tell us your thoughts about this publication, *Sacred Journey*.

Don't think about that now. Imagelessness. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. I need to write a column tomorrow, and I think I want to write about how, for years now, I've been getting wrong-number calls for somebody named Daisy. Who is this person? I have a title: "Sweet Mystery of Daisy." I begin toying with ideas of where to go from there, then remember I'm supposed to be praying.

Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. David has to get his wisdom teeth out. Where is that money coming from? Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Where the water came through the hall ceiling, when the tub was leaking, I painted over it, but it shows through. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me.

Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Please show me how I'm rebellious. I want to stop. Make me a better mother. Make me kinder. Help me get out of being in your way so much. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Have mercy. On me.

P O E T R Y



Thunderstorm, June

Jennifer Anne Cottrill

Rain clouds hang their humid weight
upon an earth that cannot bear to hold it.
Green leaves dulled by the amber gray
of a brewing storm at sunset
shiver in the wet heat,
whispering wordless sentences spelling out doom.

The guilty world and I resist
the press of judgement's ceiling about to fall.

I resist the cry in my throat . . .
then—

Lord have mercy!
Christ have mercy!
Lord have mercy!

breaks in me,
a thundercrack—
and lightning rends the overfull sky . . .

My soul's wide mouth opens like a cup
awaiting the drizzle, then
the outpour,
the downpour,
the overflow
of grace.

Jennifer Anne Cottrill holds a Masters degree in spiritual formation and works on the administrative staff of Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, IL.

ILLUMINATIONS



Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go. And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes.

- *Etty Hillesum*

There are times not to answer the door, not to answer the phone, not to do undone things, but to rest in silence from everything. The world can wait five minutes. In fact, no matter how busy we are, no matter how well organized, no matter how little rest we allow ourselves, we will never do all that needs to be done. But to do well what we are called to do, it is essential to nurture a capacity for inner stillness, such quiet, deep-down listening is itself prayer.

- *Jim Forest, Praying with Icons*

Just as we accept that our neighbor's face does not resemble ours, so we must accept that our neighbor's views do not resemble ours.

- *Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk*

Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.

- *Kahlil Gibran*

Glenn C. Gibbs, a reader from Ipswich, MA, submitted Etty Hillesum's words. Send us the quotes that have stirred your soul or challenged your thinking. Please include the book or complete source, if possible.

THE WAYS OF PRAYER

Praying from the Surface of Your Skin

Richard J. Broderick



I credit mosquitoes for teaching me this form of prayer. This is how it happened.

A run of sunny, humid, summer days in July gave inspiration for three of us to drive to a remote lake in the Adirondack Mountains of New York for a day of canoeing. Arriving and anxious to begin, we found that we were easy game for the swarming squadrons of female *anopheles* attacking our exposed bodies as we carried the canoe overhead through dense forest. Dante left this form of earthly torment out of his Inferno. We lost no time launching our canoe into the cool waters of this calm lake with our faces into the warming sun and gentle breeze. The itching of my exposed skin seemed now to spread over my whole body. A tormented terrain of dermal cells called out for relief. The distant sounds of birds served to distract me for the moment. The rhythm of our paddling sent a rolling wave announcing our presence to the shore creatures.

We were alone in this vast expanse of blue sky, green forest, and cool water. It felt good and very primitive. A mile

Richard J. Broderick is a Catholic priest who gives workshops in eco-justice and eco-spirituality. He holds a degree in entomology and considers himself a self-styled naturalist. He lives in Cohoes, New York.

from the launch site we stopped at a rocky point for a swim and lunch. I was the first to plunge into the silken waters. Immediately the water felt like a healing balm soothing the wounds and tired muscles. It was then, while swimming, that I realized the surface of my skin was like a semipermeable membrane to the soul. All the natural elements of cool water, air, and sunlight were passing through the surface of my skin to the inner chambers of my soul. Gradually, I felt movement from the deep canyons of thoughts in my mind outward to the surface of my skin and to the earth and universe all around me. Swimming in the water was like being in a womb, and my soul was feasting on the sensations of life all around me. I was being transformed from a complaining creature into a praying one. I listened to myself almost automatically praying the *Canticle of Daniel*; You trees and cedars, bless the Lord . . . mountains and hills praise the Lord, lakes and rivers praise and exalt God forever.

My skin, like solar panels, was absorbing all that was around me and feeding it to my soul with increasing energy and high praise to God. I was fully living the present moment. For there was nothing except this lake, this air, this sunlight, and me. For the first time in my life I actually felt the season of summer. It was on the surface of my skin.

Lying down on the giant granite boulders left behind from a previous ice age, I could feel the deep radiant heat stored in these stones from the sun now passing into my back and legs. Now, I was gazing above into the bows of the pine trees as I listened to some chickadees. I realized in that moment I had left the dark inner cave of my head and moved to the sunny surface of my skin where life was abundant, in the full light and joy of a refreshing summer day.

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

Revisiting the Emptiness

Jane O'Shaughnessy



Intent upon carving out a block of vacation time, I thought a few days spent in the Berkshires might be refreshing. My husband and I settled on staying at an historic inn in the village of Lenox, easily accessible to Jacob's Pillow and Tanglewood. I had worked one summer, thirty-one years earlier, as a camp counselor in the small town of Cummington and recalled the gentle green hills, forests, and streams of this part of Massachusetts as being serenely beautiful. As we sketched out our upcoming days there, the thought of finding Belgian Village Camp flickered through my mind.

On the second day of our respite we began touring, and my inclination grew stronger to revisit my camp. I hadn't looked up the address before we left, but the path opened before us and finally we drove down a private lane leading to what was now Shire Village Camp. My heart dropped some in disappointment as I surveyed the fences and small

Jane O'Shaughnessy writes from Calaumet, MA. She is a graduate of the Guild for Spiritual Guidance and a spiritual guide in association with a wholistic center on Cape Cod.

outbuildings badly in need of paint. I parked my car, as requested by the sign, and proceeded on foot down the hill to the center of the camp to meet what had been a part of my life.

In the summer of 1966, Belgian Village Camp was an attractive and well-programmed camp for girls coming mostly from Westchester County and New York City. The girls arrived in summer dresses with luggage carrying appropriate outdoor clothing, whites for dress-up. They would be there for the entire season. There was a large staff, most of whom returned year after year. The summer after my freshman year in college, three other friends and I had decided to apply to various camps, but we were offered jobs all at different places. So it was with some regret and apprehension that I arrived alone in the Berkshires, as a first-year counselor of horseback riding, tennis, and swimming. All these years later, as I walked toward the camp office, I noticed the cabin on the hill where I had roomed and supervised six campers, a cabin which had once been William Cullen Bryant's schoolhouse. I approached the gathering place and main quarters, a semi-circular connected series of farm buildings graced with spires, arched doorways and windows, and stately columns. A scattering of campers and one counselor lounged about the courtyard. I introduced myself, then went into the office to speak to the director, explaining my nostalgic quest. She was welcoming and offered free access to the camp.

First I headed down the lane deep into the woods for the waterfront where the stream was dammed to create a good-size swimming hole. It seemed vaguely the same, although I didn't remember the small concrete fenced-in pool that had been built beyond it. I walked slowly back up the drive, then abruptly left the road to climb up into the pine grove. The

campfire area was still there. I sat on one of the timbered beams in this, the camp's most sacred place, and entered into my memories.

Although I had managed fairly well as a camp counselor, I had felt lonely and isolated most of that summer. I mainly taught horseback riding which has always been my first love. I had felt comforted in some way by the horses, and of course by living in the beauty of this natural setting. But I had perceived a lack of connection, a separateness between the campers and staff, and myself.

At that time in my life I simply was not able to live in the quiet. I depended on distractions to keep me from feeling

*I had
been led to
this desert
to face my
emptiness.*

the emptiness that was not far from my consciousness. My childhood and adolescence had been a time of uneasiness and alienation, living in a family dominated by my alcoholic mother. At home I would often withdraw to the safety of my room, but here at Belgian Village Camp, I had no means to even process the depths of what I was experiencing. I survived in

my usual fashion by doing the task before me, aware of my discomfort but unable to helpfully address it.

Sitting on that beam thirty-one years later, my heart opened to that younger self. I recalled the words of Hosea 2:16, "So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." I could now see that I had been led to this desert to face the truth of my own emptiness. I retouched the feelings of that summer. I, again, felt the desolation and found in myself that hollow, aching space.

But now, years later, at this point in my life I am committed to the spiritual journey, travelling alone and with others in search of our loving God. Coming to the pine grove

and finding the wounded heart of my undeveloped self was another pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the home of my indwelling God. Sitting in the deep silence of the woods I felt whole, resting in God's love. A little piece deep inside of me had been mended, and I would be more solid and able to give in the future.

Thomas Merton encouraged this necessary step of facing the emptiness. It is when we meet it and come to terms with it that we find our joy, our God. The abyss we avoid will be abundantly filled with God's presence made known. Merton wrote of the contemplative who intuitively seeks the dark and unknown path, who is willing to enter into the mystery. It is in response to an incomprehensible call from God. I believe there was a whisper of a call that drew me back to that camp to sit in solitude among the pines. To encounter the emptiness safely we must have a strong and healthy sense of self. I was offered this opportunity of grace at a time when I live in secure awareness of God's presence in my life. There have been other occasions of confronting these empty aches either in the company of trusted guides or in the sanctity of a safe place. This return to a tucked away experience of my past was a venture unplanned, but as is often the case, gently healing.

In *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* St. John of the Cross wrote, "A soul makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears . . ." In recognizing my own emptiness and sitting in God's presence while feeling this void, my own hurt was replaced with the love of God. It was a simple but profound step on the journey.



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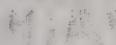
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SPIRITUALITY & THE FAMILY



In My Father's House

Elizabeth M. Racicot

During a thirty-day retreat at Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester, Massachusetts, I found myself distracted by worries about a male friendship. It was late and I was tired. I stopped praying and went to sleep. That night I dreamed an old drunk came to a makeshift clinic looking for help. I sat down with him, took his hands in mine, and told him that if he doesn't stop drinking he will die. I wake up feeling sad and an image of my dad comes back to me—the last image I have of him—he is drunk, sick, and close to death.

As I begin to pray, I have a sense that I have been looking for a father in this male friendship—a father I will never find there or anywhere outside of me. Then Jesus invites me to embrace God as my father—what a singularly surprising idea for this feminist who rejected God the Father long ago!

I began to cry. For my father, who died—broken and alone—from alcoholism. For myself, because I've spent so much time and energy looking for a father where he could not be found. I cry joyful tears that Jesus would want to

Elizabeth M. Racicot lives with her husband in upstate New York and is involved in the ministry through St. Mary's Catholic Community of Crescent. She is both a freelance writer on religion, spirituality, and social justice and a technical writer in the computer industry.

give me such a gift. Then Jesus asks to take me to God the Father. God wants to hold me and to assure me that my earthly father has found a dwelling place in God's house. I let God hold me. He soothes me and it feels good. He tells me that he wept for my father when he got so sick. We remember together the last time I saw him.

It's 1983. My dad has been recovering from alcoholism for twelve years and begins to drink again. In a telephone call from New York to North Carolina, he tells me that he wants to get sober and needs my help.

So I travel to Queens, New York and arrange for him to be admitted to a detox center. Several hours after my father leaves for the detox center, the doorbell rings and I look out the window. A taxi driver is helping my father out of a cab.

He's wearing his old, worn bedroom slippers—a fake brown leather cracked across the front—they have no backs, so he shuffles to keep them on. He wears faded, navy blue socks that don't stay up and a colorless bathrobe that reaches to his knees and is partially open from the wind. His legs are covered with red sores, his stomach extended, his skin yellowing, and his eyes bloodshot and listless. The detox center turned him away because he was too ill. They say he needs to go to a hospital. I ask him if I can take him to a hospital. "No," he says. He sits in his chair, shaking, and asks for a beer. I realize that there is nothing more I can do. I return home to North Carolina. I never see him again. Several months later his condition worsens and he's taken in an ambulance to Elmhurst General Hospital where he's detoxed. He lasts two weeks. His heart gives out and he dies in his sleep, alone. There will be no funeral.

I weep for this man and for the father I never had. As I continue to pray, I see an image of my father's heart in the palm of my hand. It's shattered into pieces, little and big,

shriveled and cold—like pieces of dried fruit. Langston Hughes' lament comes back to me:

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

Or does it explode? ("Harlem," 1951)

What were my father's dreams, before the sores on his legs and the shuffled walk? I only remember one—to buy a house. He was going to build a carpenter shop in that house and retire there. But my father had another problem, besides alcoholism, and it cast a wide and dark shadow over his life and mine. My father was a violent man who abused his wife and children—I cannot count the times that he exploded in rage.

After separating from my mother in the 1960s, he was forced to take an early retirement from his carpenter's job—the alcoholism, the violence, and the abuse had destroyed his marriage, his family, his career, and his health.

I keep turning the image around in the palm of my hand. It's been a heavy thing to carry around these fourteen years, but it's not as heavy as it once was. The many, many years

of therapy and self-help meetings, retreats and prayers have healed much of my pain. But there is still this deep longing for a father. As I continue to turn the image in my hand, the heart becomes whole again. It feels lighter and easy to hold. I give it to God, to God the Father, because it is time to let it go. It's time to walk on with this new father inside of me, the one of whom Isaiah sings:

*For I am Yahweh, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I have given Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
Since I regard you as precious,
since you are honoured and I love you. (43:3-4)*

“I love you” are the words I’ve always wanted to hear from my father and now I do. I know that there is still a lot of mystery left in all of this: Why did my father do what he did? What does it mean to embrace God as Father? But I know that life is short, and I am loved. It is time to laugh and to let go of the weeping and the worrying. It is time to dance and time to sing.

PRAYERS

A Prayer for Prayer

Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman

O My God
My soul's companion
My heart's precious friend
I turn to You.

I need to close out the noise
To rise above the noise
The noise that interrupts—
The noise that separates—
The noise that isolates.
I need to hear You again.

In the silence of my innermost being,
In the fragments of my yearned-for wholeness,
I hear whispers of Your presence—
Echoes of the past when You were with me
When I felt Your nearness
When together we walked—
When You held me close, embraced me in Your love,

Sheldon Zimmerman is Rabbi of Temple Emanu-el in Dallas, TX. Bhikshuni Weisbrot, of Jamaica, NY, submitted the words of Sri Chinmoy.

A Prayer for Prayer is excerpted from Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength & Solace of the Psalms. Edited by Rabbi Simka Y. Weintraub.

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laughed with me in my joy.
I yearn to hear You again.

In Your oneness, I find healing.
In the promise of Your love, I am soothed.
In Your wholeness, I too can become whole again.

Please listen to my call—
 help me find the words
 help me find the strength within
 help me shape my mouth, my voice, my heart
so that I can direct my spirit and find You in prayer
In words only my heart can speak
In songs only my soul can sing
Lifting my eyes and heart to You.

Adonai S'fatai Tiftach—open my lips, precious God,
so that I can speak with You again.

I Shall Listen

Sri Chinmoy

I shall listen to Your command, I shall.
In Your sky I shall fly, I shall fly.
Eternally You are mine, my very own.
You are my heart's wealth.
For You at night in tears I shall cry.
For You at dawn with light I shall smile.
For You, for You, Beloved, only for You.

P I L G R I M A G E

In Search of Ramana

Robert Hirschfield



The gray-haired man next to me on the bus from Madras to Tiruvannamalai was reading a newsletter called *Creative Silence*. I had decided to journey to Ramanasramam in silence, so I just smiled at the irony of the newsletter, and our driver's hand on the horn as he drove through the wicked September heat of Tamil Nadu, India's southernmost state, abandoned by the summer monsoon. My journey actually began twenty years before when I saw a picture of Ramana Maharshi in a storefront window in lower Manhattan. I went inside (it was a storefront ashram) and learned that the man was a Hindu sage, around whom an ashram had grown in South India. Subtly at first, then more strongly, the ashram breathed its roots into me.

The gray-haired man, it turned out, was V.S. Ramanan, President of Ramanasramam, for whom I had a delivery of raisins and photos from devotees in New York. Ramana

Robert Hirschfield is a social worker who works with people who are mentally ill. He regularly writes about Eastern Spirituality. He lived at Ramanasramam for nearly a month before returning to his home in New York City.

Maharshi was his great uncle. Later, he would say to me, "With a scholar, *Bhagavan* (beloved one) was a scholar, with a coolie, he was a coolie, with a dog, he was a dog." The Master's gentle universality was one of the reasons I became his devotee.

When the auto rickshaw plunked me down at the ashram entrance, I drifted dreamlike into the space of peacocks, monkeys and *sadhus* (devotees) sitting in the dust, clamoring for rupees. Above me stood the bouldered red mountain, Arunachala. I knew that mountain. In pictures of Ramana, it often rises up from the back of his head like an inverted conical cap. Its brooding presence made me happy.

I had to remove my shoes passing the interlocked halls where Ramana Maharshi and his mother lay buried. (Ramana died in 1950.) The paved walkway was burning. It burned up my happiness as it seared my feet. I was so distressed I neglected to ask, "Who is distressed?" The *vichara* (self-inquiry) Ramana teaches, which helps me endure the shrieking of the New York City subway, eluded me the moment I set foot in his ashram.

I made my first stop the Old Hall, where Ramana sat on his couch for all those decades, wrapped in silence, surrounded by devotees, by wandering seekers, by monkeys, by peacocks, by cows, by birds who made their nests in the old thatched roof of the hall. Now, the couch with its red-petaled bedspread, hosts a painting of Ramana smiling a bemused smile.

I sat down on a mat beside another Westerner, along the wall opposite the couch. Ramana would often emphasize that physical locations, even Ramanasramam, were of no real importance, being projections of the mind. But I immediately, and heretically, began thinking of some of the Old Hall's illustrious ghosts: Mouni Sadhu and Ganapati Muni,

Major Chadwick and Balarma Reddy. Four disparate branches that found their way to a single tree. Chadwick was a British military man and mystic whose booming voice was legendary. Ganapati Muni, poet and Sanskrit scholar, a towering spiritual figure in his own right, was hauled by Ramana out of his spiritual Dark Night. Mouni Sadhu was a Polish-born contemplative, Catholic in origin, who lived at Ramanasramam during the final months of Ramana's life, and wrote a luminous book about him, *In Days of Great Peace*. Balarma Reddy was a Hindu seeker, humble and typical of many in India, whose quest is for the perfect Master.

All that remained of them was their silence. It made me remember, with a jolt, why I had come to Ramanasramam. Slowly, I was able to quiet my mind. Before long, names, places, mythologies born on the printed page, began to recede. I grew aware of people quietly entering and leaving the hall. Tamil women in iridescent saris pressed their heads to the black flagstones before the Master's picture. The Westerners, for the most part, did likewise. (Ramanasramam is one of the few places in India where patchwork Hindus from the West can intermingle in common devotion with traditional Hindus.)

My eyes were drawn to the light sliding along the couch from the overhead window. That same light once touched the long, reclining body in its meager loincloth. As he lay dying of cancer, Ramana would say to his devotees, "You attach too much importance to the body." But photos of Ramana, with his soft, piercing gaze, are all over the ashram, and easy to get attached to. Especially his eyes, whose kindness sails through the heart's crust.

The dead Ramana is buried behind the Old Hall, in another hall. Samadhi Hall it's called. His grave is covered over with pieces of marble, a square black piece and a white oval.

Piled on top of the marble are the orange and white flowers that the Tamil women wear in their hair.

The burial hall is large, airy, brightly empty, but for the grave and the photos of Ramana along the walls. It is a strange mixture of grandeur and simplicity. I had expected a more compressed, severe place. But when the clustered bells by the tomb rang out ecstatically at the end of *puja* (worship), and the flower petals rained down on Ramana's grave, I *pranammed* (prostrated) with arms outstretched as far as they would go. For a devotee, I normally lack the talent for devotion. But all during *puja*, I found my spirit flying above the tomb. At Ramanasramam, *jnana* (knowledge) may be the theory, but *bhakti* (devotion, adoration) is for many, the practice.

Circling the Master's tomb, as is the custom, my thoughts would turn inevitably to his life: His enlightenment at sixteen at his uncle's house in Madurai, his journey to Arunachala, his life of silence in the Arunachala Temple, in the Virupaksha cave, his final descent from the heights of the mountain to his mother's grave, where he who claimed no one as his devotee, found himself at the center of an international community of devotees.

I felt a little uneasy about letting such thoughts roll over me. The real Ramana was not to be found in shards of biography. Where could they roost in the realized Self, that placeless place Ramana occupied in the world?

It is easy to get trapped in the honeyed web of Ramana stories, even while trying to transcend them. One old devotee I knew said of his young neighbor, "He complains that I shouldn't be telling the Westerners who come to the ashram my stories. He says I should tell them instead to practice *vichara*."

That same young man, while escorting me up the mountain, stopped suddenly and pointed to a spot in the far distance.



Robert Hirschfield

"You see the spur of the hill?" he cried. "That's where Ramana's mother came to him and begged him to come home."

Ramana's renunciation (he left his family at sixteen to live an ascetic life) intrigued us more than the question, "Who was there to renounce?"

People come from everywhere to Ramanasramam, from China and Japan, from the Czech Republic, Slovenia and the Ukraine, from Chile and Argentina, from England and Germany (the Germans are the most numerous of the Europeans), as well as from Australia and America. Some are devotees, but for others Ramanasramam is simply a stop on the spiritual caravan route of South India.

"I could see myself being a devotee of Ramana," said Alex, a nurse from Australia, "if it weren't for Baba. Wherever I am, I feel Baba's grace."

After a few days, he was off to Putaparthi, where Sai Baba, the miracle-working holy man, has his ashram.

Bridget, a British nun from Poona, who did *pradakshina* (the ritual walk around Arunachala) despite undergoing a recent hip replacement, had rented a room in town and planned to stay in Tiruvannamalai indefinitely. Bridget was both a Christian and a devotee. She had encountered Ramana in the time-honoured contemplative manner: silence meeting silence.

We discussed *vichara*. I raised an issue the Master had periodically addressed: The problem of focusing without faltering on the question, "Who am I?"

Bridget's sympathetic smile was framed by the remote indulgence of the advanced seeker.

"Maybe at first there is difficulty. But once you go deep within, the question just keeps asking itself. No effort is needed."

I must have sighed. I've known "Who am I?" only as a fleeting internal visitor, never as a permanent occupant.

"Our real nature is *mukti* (deliverance)," Ramana said. "But we are imagining we are bound and are making various strenuous attempts to become free, while we are all the while free."

Ramana's cosmic poke in the ribs. Lighten up and be serious. "Who am I?" is not a shadow to be chased after. "Who am I?" is what is when all the chasing stops.

Cross-legged on the floor before the absent presence in the Old Hall, I felt strangely transparent. In that room, which I had come so far to enter, I was pleased to relinquish my contraband of delusions. (Inevitably, I'd retrieve them at some point before leaving.)

Nobody leaves the Old Hall without taking silence with them. How much one takes depends on how much one can carry. I carried the silence around with me for as long as it would stay. On the good days, it carried me.

Then, even outside the ashram walls, where I was regularly ambushed by the terrible racket of Tamil India, it too seemed to fall under the spell of Ramana's silence. Like myself, it seemed to fall happily off the map of the world. On the good days.

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